

Title: Recipe for Joy
Text: Hebrews 13.17
Theme: "Radical" living that displays the glory of the gospel.
Series: Hebrews #60
Prop Stmt: Watchful leadership and submissive followers displays Christ
Aim: I aim to call to my people to follow the leadership of the church while I challenge the leadership of the church to care for the flock.

Read Text:

Conflict at work or conflict in a political situation is usually not nearly as distressing as conflict in our homes and conflict in the church. My observation through the years is that conflict in the church comes from one of two surface reasons or a combination of them. Those surface reasons are: 1) The failure of the leadership to lead and/or 2) the failure of the congregation to follow. Now, as I said, this is what is seen on the surface. Underneath both of those is self-centeredness. Self-centered people are individualists who believe and act as if they are a law unto themselves. They have no concept or no desire to live in submission to others. They constantly challenge any leadership with a "who says?" attitude. Self-centered leaders are just as bad. They act as if they can abuse their position as a leader in order to get what they want. It is popular to portray abusive leaders as surly, mean, demanding and hypocritical and there are plenty of examples of that. But, leadership that is passive, complacent, and ambiguous is just as bad.

We see this vividly displayed in so many political contexts. The people want a leader who will give them what they want and the leader wants the people to give him/her what he/she wants. The result is mutual manipulation. And when either one of these things happens in the church, (self-centered leadership and/or a self-centered congregation) the damage that is done to the reputation of the gospel is egregious. Almost every person here knows someone who refuses to be part of the church because of situations like this. There are children who grew up listening to their parents criticize and demean the leadership of the church. And today, those kids have no respect for the gospel or the church. Their souls are under condemnation in part due to the self-centeredness of their parents. There are also children and adults who grew up listening to church leaders who turned out to be liars and hypocrites who used their people for self-centered ends. And today some of those people who were exposed to that firsthand have no respect for the gospel or the church. The accountability that God places upon the shoulders of the leadership of the church is enormous, as we will see.

I was talking with a couple of pastors recently, both of whom are dealing with a group of ungodly, obstinate people who are incredibly blind to their own arrogance. In both cases, these pastors read this verse to some of these people and asked them to respond. Now, I know both of these pastors and some of their elders. These are good men, and their churches are blessed to have these men as their shepherds. But, in one case after reading this text, one arrogant church-member said, "we don't follow that around here."

Cornerstone, I want you to know that I preach this text this morning with joy. I speak on behalf of the elders when I say with Paul that, "I (we) thank my God in all my remembrance of you" (Phil. 1.3). The Lord has graciously visited us as a people with a spirit of mutual humility. So, I preach this text with an attitude of gratefulness to you and to our leadership. There is a care that we all have for one another. We recognize that we are not a political power and we do not function as a body with the spirit of politics as the world understands it. We are part of another kingdom; we are citizens of another nation. We have a perfect King who reigns in the heavens, who will not be removed from office, and what is more, we love the King. We love the King, because the King first loved us and gave himself up for us by dying for us on the cross. He then in turn says to the under-shepherds of his flock, you serve me by giving of yourself to my flock. And he says to the flock, you follow me, by following the under-shepherds. It is so simple isn't it? Simple, yet impossible apart from the gospel.

But, what happens when we function like that? There is joy! There is joy on the part of the leaders and security on the part of the people. That joy and security, that settledness, that contentedness, that peace, that safety, that resting of soul and spirit adorns the gospel and magnifies Christ. That is why I have entitled this sermon, "Recipe for Joy." Now before we dig in, remember the setting. This book was written to a group of believers in Rome who were ethnically Jewish. They had experienced political persecution, religious persecution and were about to go through it again. The pressure was going to be intense and the temptation to give up, give in and walk away was enormous. But this was no time to quit. Nor was this time to turn on each other. How do you fight for unity when you are under pressure? How can you and your church be characterized by joy?

1. **The Congregation must follow the leadership of the Elders** (17a)

Notice that this is not optional. This is a command. It is a command that freaks a few people out. It sounds cultish. It reminds some of us of guys like David Koresh (Waco) and Jim Jones (Guyana). Now, hang on, because this verse does not sit here isolation of everything else. This command is linked to an entire flow of thought that we have been chewing on throughout our study of Hebrews. We are not rugged individualists. We are broken sinners who have been saved from isolation. Sin separates us from God. Sin separates us from each other. Sin takes away our humanness and our capacity for real relationships. When we come to faith in Christ, we are rescued from this isolation. We are born into the family of God. This is seen in this book where the AH speaks affectionately to these people as brothers and sisters. He encourages them not to forsake their assembling together, but to gather regularly in order to motivate one another to love and good works. The people of God are people of the gospel, meaning they are people of honesty, humility, openness, encouragement, and teachableness. The people of God are a family who has access into the very presence of God through the sacrifice of Christ. The people of God worship on earth together in the presence of the angels before the throne. The people of God look to Christ as our great high priest who represents and intercedes for us and who claims us as his own. This access, this standing, this position gives to us freedom, security and joy. We confess this by publicly declaring our allegiance to God through Christ. We cannot function as rugged individualists because it is a denial of the

gospel. We function as a body. We have no tolerance for cancer in the body. We are on guard against the body turning on itself and creating division. We have no tolerance for false teaching and false teachers and false living, as all of these destroy the body. But instead, we look for ways in which we can encourage one another recognizing that there is no way that we function like this unless we place a high priority on our gathering together. So, when we read, “obey your leaders and submit to them” we need to think like this: As brothers and sisters who are part of the same family and the flock of our Lord Jesus Christ, we put our love for Christ and our submission to our King on display by joyfully following the leadership that Christ has established to represent him.

This is not the language of cults. This is not the language of wicked masters and docile servants. Leaders of cults do not care for souls because they deny the gospel. Wicked masters do not put Christ on display because they do not serve the ones, and if need be die for the ones that God has entrusted to them. This is the language of the church. This is the language of fellowship. This is the language of the gospel. This is the language of harmony. This is the recipe for joy.

This command is not to be used by leaders to demand mindless obedience on the part of the people. The assumption here is that the leaders are caring for the souls of the people. In fact, as 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5 make so clear, the leadership of the church does not have absolute leadership. Only Christ has that. The leadership of the church has vested leadership. They represent the authority of Christ in so far as they represent Christ. If a leader disqualifies him self from spiritual leadership he has no authority. Also, this text does not give leaders the right to micromanage lives. The leaders are to watch over your souls. They do this by feeding, leading, encouraging, nurturing and helping you mature. They give counsel and direction, and help you grow up. They do not make all of your decisions for you, but rather teach you the Word of God so that you can make God-honoring decisions. Now, this first point may cause a few people to be a bit nervous. But it is the second part that is absolutely terrifying.

2. **The Elders will give an account of their care for the Flock.** (17b)

Notice that the text states, “Obey your leaders (plural) and submit to them” (plural). There is no room for rugged individualism on the part of the congregation, nor on the part of the leadership. God designed the local church to be led by a plurality of elders, not by one guy. Fact is, every single person is to live in submission, and the question is, to whom. Children are to submit to parents, workers to bosses, wives to husbands, everyone to the government and the rulers to God. Members of the church are to be under the oversight of the elders and the elders are to each other and to God. In the kingdoms of this world, leadership is seen as power. In the kingdom of Christ, leadership is responsibility to love, serve (John 13) care and if need be die for those under your oversight.

This language of watchfulness speaks of a shepherd who will go without sleep in order to protect the flock from ravenous beasts. It also speaks of a soldier who is guarding his post, ready to sound the alarm should the enemy appear. (Ezekiel 3) The rest of the soldiers sleep well when they trust the watchfulness of the sentry. This watchfulness is to

be exercised over souls. That means that they are to feed you with the Word of God and pray for you and protect you from false doctrine. If need be, and it is necessary, they are to warn you when they see that you are believing something that is false, or you are living in a way that is not complementary to Christ. They are to protect the body from sin that left unaddressed will grow and infect others. This is not always fun. There are times when people get their “feelings hurt” no matter how careful you may be in addressing these issues. But, “keeping the peace” (even if it is a false peace) is not the calling of a shepherd. The shepherds will give an account to God for how they exercised watchfulness over the souls. There is a weight that the elders carry. We will give an account to God for our leadership and as 12.29 says, "our God is a consuming fire." God, the Father has chosen you, the church to be the bride for his Son, King Jesus and our calling is to treat you like He will when He comes to gather you with him.

That is why leadership in the church is so different than anything else. It is also dangerous. When you enjoy or observe good leadership in the church, there is an atmosphere of respect and appreciation. Now, watch this, because this is one of the dangers for leaders. Respect and appreciation is so much better than scorn and resentment. If, you observe how people respect a leader, it is so easy to desire to be a leader in order to experience respect like that. Wrong goal! The goal is not to be respected. The goal for a leader is to put Christ on display by caring for souls as His representative regardless of whether or not you are respected. The truth is, some people do not want you to care for their souls because they do not want to deal with the truth about who they really are.

The task of watching over souls is overwhelming. The reality of accountability is truly terrifying. One day, every man who has served as an elder of this flock will stand before the Lord of the church and give an account for how we exercised our office of oversight. This is what is devastating. You are called to follow the elders. That means that the elders have an enormous responsibility to lead you by walking toward Christ and with Christ.

Being an elder is in one sense like being the father of the bride. This is what Paul was talking about in 2 Corinthians 11 when he said to the believers there, “...*I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.*” Our task as elders is to care for you and protect you, and watch over you and love you and pray for you until that Great Wedding Day, when your marriage to Christ is consummated. And then as we watch Christ take you as His bride into His kingdom, knowing that you will be loved perfectly, and that your joy will be without end, we will weep with gratitude that you made it home by God’s grace and that our mission is done.

Being an elder is in another sense like the being the husband. Husbands are called to lead their wives and love their wives like Christ loves the church. I try to impress this upon young men as to what this means to the girl who has agreed to marry him. She is taking his name. She is giving up that which she has been known by in order to be known by, marked by, and identified by your name. That means that everything that you are known by, she is going to be known by. She is now so vulnerable to you. What you do affects her. Her security is now tied to your decision-making.

I remember meeting with a couple who were recently engaged. The guy had this attitude that he had done this girl a really big favor by asking her to marry him, after all, he was quite a catch, and she ought to be profoundly grateful that he had chosen her. Now, I had watched this girl grow up in this church, and while I was not her father, I had some of that sense of jealousy that Paul spoke about for her. So, in our first meeting I lovingly explained to his young man that this girl meant the world to me and to a number of men in this church whom I named. I then said, "If you do not care for her and love her, and provide for her and adore her then we will come after you." The truth is, the Father, is the real Father of the Bride and the leaders are going to give an account to Him for how we have loved, cared, protected and provided for the Bride that He has chosen for His Son. If the elders do not take of her, God will come after us because He is jealous with a white-hot love for the Bride that He has chosen for His Son.

The elders of this church love and fear this position all at the same time. By God's grace, the elders of this church will love and fear this responsibility until the Husband comes to take His Bride.

3. **Leaders who find joy in their oversight make much of Christ** (17c)

Now, since the congregation is the focal point of this command, the congregation is told of the benefits of following the leadership of the elders. The benefit is elders who serve you with joy. In the last 40 years, the nature of politics in this country has become nothing less than toxic. While there are many views of our president that I am not sympathetic too, I am sympathetic to the fact that his family is extremely vulnerable to abuse and that is wrong. If someone runs for the position of dog-catcher in my city, I can expect some hit piece to show up in the mail insinuating that this person is a closet terrorist. It is embarrassing to see the rudeness and mean-spiritedness, and pettiness, and just outright cruelty that people in leadership are subjected too. There are so many good and capable people who are unwilling to run for public office because they do not want to subject their families to such humiliation and obtrusive scrutiny.

Believe it or not, churches can do that to their leaders and when they do, they are showing that there is absolutely no difference between life outside the family of God and life inside of the family of God. That is tragic! It is tragic, toxic, and sinful, when we bring the cynicism of the world into the church. But, when we function according to a new political reality called the Kingdom of Jesus Christ and when our politics as usual are governed by the gospel, it is awesome! It is refreshing. It is encouraging! It is downright unusual!

I said to you at the outset, that this sermon is more encouragement than it is confrontational. We have enjoyed God's grace and the elders here are a joyful bunch. I commend you and thank God for you. One of the evidences of your glad submission is seen in the number of people who grow up in this church and want to pursue some type of vocational ministry. That is a tribute to the grace of God through you. But there are some of you who attend here and have attended here for a while, but you have never

joined. You cannot obey this command because you have never committed yourself to this family and the elders have never committed themselves to your care. You are simply hitchhiking. You have your excuses, but you do not have a true reason and you need to face the fact that one day you will stand before the Lord and explain to him why it was okay for you to live outside of the oversight of the church that he established for your care, accountability and growth.

There are times when I have said to parents that it is so obvious to me that your children well loved because of their contentment, and security. The same thing is true in marriage. Husbands, one of your goals should be to pursue the joy of your wife. When she is happy and secure, brother, she makes you look good. Wives, one of your goals should be the pursuit of the joy of your husband. When he is happy and content, he makes you look good. When the leadership of a church is full of joy, it reflects well on the congregation, which ultimately reflects well upon Christ. Did you ever see Christ complaining? Did Christ ever grumble? Did Christ ever have an occasion or “reason” to do so? Sure! So, if the perfect Son of God could follow the imperfect leadership that he was subjected to on this earth, then certainly we, who are imperfect can do the same. And what a difference it makes when we do.

John MacArthur said,

It is the responsibility of the church to help their leaders rule with joy and satisfaction. One of the ways of doing this is through willing submission to their authority. The joy of our leaders in the Lord should be a motivation for submission. We are not to submit begrudgingly or out of a feeling of compulsion, but willingly, so that our elders and pastors may experience joy in their work with us.¹

How many of you know someone who has the gift of complaining? Seriously, it is not a gift, is it? Complaining is not unusual, it is usual. It is expected. It is normal because it reflects a heart that is full of discontentment. Do you really want to shine like a light for the gospel in a dark world? Would you like your life to be like a 500,000 megawatt light that beams into the night sky attracting curious looks for miles around? Have you ever longed to be used by God in a powerful way that puts him on display? You can. Listen to Philippians 2.14-15.

“Do all things without grumbling or questioning, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world....”

Did you get that? If we were a no-complain zone because we were a no-complain people, because we practiced solving problems with humility, grace, reason, and by going to the person instead of going to others about the person, we would be an even happier people than we are. The only way this spirit of joy and security is going to be protected and promoted is through our mutual commitment to the gospel. The gospel is humbling to

¹ MacArthur’s Commentary on Hebrews, p. 446

sinners and glorious to Christ who humbled himself by living in our place the life that we could not live and then dying in our place so that the penalty for our sin was paid and the righteous and terrifying wrath of God was satisfied. You belong here and we belong here, only by grace. And when you really grasp what that means, then your heart will sing and you can join the joy!